

of groups that medievalists don't reach. The potential for connection is there, however, and many people on an individual basis are making those connections and training students to make those connections as well. To return to Humpty Dumpty, it's important that we not follow his lead, and choose what we want feminism to mean, but that we engage in the collective endeavor of figuring out what it means, in order to be able to talk in a language that reaches across fields. Not only will it allow our scholarship to reach a broader audience, but in the spirit of self-interest, I submit that it will help on the job market as well.

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THE CRISIS IN THE HUMANITIES: FEMINISM, MEDIEVAL STUDIES, AND THE ACADEMY

This paper addresses the crisis of the humanities (here understood to include the field of history) from the dual perspective of feminism and Medieval Studies. The structure of higher education in this country is truly diverse, and our careers and our insights are shaped in part by the differing missions, expectations, and cultures of the institutions in which we work. For this reason it is important for me to point out that the reflections on the "big picture" offered here have arisen in the context of twelve years of teaching, service, and research at a private research university. I also speak in this paper as president of the Society for Medieval Feminist Scholarship, taking that role as an occasion to reflect on the challenges facing the feminist medievalist community in today's rapidly changing academy, and to enumerate the intellectual strengths which we, the community of feminist medievalists, possess and upon which we can draw to meet those challenges.

I will not discuss here the relative merits and demerits of theories of gender, feminism, and sexuality that invigorate the academy today, noting only that debate among divergent scholarly approaches and theories is fundamental to the health and vitality of the scholarly community. No one approach, theory, or grand narrative has a monopoly on truth, creativity, insight, and rigor, whether it be, for example, critical theory, information technology, post-structuralism, poetics, deconstruction, cultural studies, philology, queer theory, or psychoanalytic criticism. We cannot know from whence new, original, and creative ideas will emerge; we can, however, act on our feminist commitment to engage in civil, intellectual debate and to press for diversity at every level within the academy.

Thinking about the crisis in the humanities means thinking about the politics of

academia, about its institutional and scholarly practices and the historical and social contexts in which those practices are embedded. My feminist examination of the crisis in the humanities begins with the observation that patriarchy is alive and well. The need for feminist politics and practices in the humanities and in the academy is as great as it has ever been. In her recent book, *Why So Slow? The Advancement of Women* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1998), cognitive psychologist Virginia Valian studies the persistence in men and women of largely unconscious interpretive categories, or gender schemata, which slightly overvalue men and undervalue women, and explores the cumulative effect of such gender schemata on the socialization of women and on women's efforts to advance to positions of leadership and authority. Valian's study reminds us that backlash is real. Hostility towards intellectual women persists, sometimes openly (the undergraduate who defies his female teacher in class, whether graduate student or professor), sometimes covertly (the departmental committee that ignores everything said by its female member). Institutional practices that perpetuate gender stereotyping and disadvantage women go largely unexamined.¹ At my institution, at least, undergraduates re-create among themselves a dominant peer culture that is highly conventional and conformist and that operates with narrow and oppressive gender stereotypes. For many students, learning in Women's Studies courses to critically examine the socialization and stereotyping of women remains a powerful moment of liberatory transformation.

For strong women are not born, they are made. In our Women's Studies programs we teach that debate is good, and that human beings are powerful when they use reason to question unexamined assumptions. We learn that sometimes what really matters the most is how you frame the question. We teach our students to speak up and speak out powerfully and persuasively, and we strive to model doing so ourselves. In the social and professional networks we create for ourselves as faculty and scholars, we share knowledge about our institutions and their practices, pragmatic strategies for achieving our goals, as well as the intellectual challenges and excitement of our research.

Patriarchy is alive and well; backlash is real; strong women are not born, they are made. If all this is true, then it means that helping women become strong women happens again and again, at different stages of life for different women, across generational lines, and in every new generation. Holding to these feminist insights may be particularly challenging at this moment in time, because they fly in the face of many myths of contemporary American society. Many Americans, male and female, believe and wish to believe that the world is fair, that they can advance on the basis of merit and achievement alone, and that discrimination on the basis of gender and race no longer exists (or that discrimination only exists when government-based remedies appear to produce bias against white males.) It can be

particularly painful for our female students, and for ourselves, to give up these beliefs. Other examples of current myths that are contravened by feminist thinking include: the notion that innovation of any kind equals progress; the belief all human beings are ruled by self-interest, and that competition is a law of nature; the conviction that social injustices and ills that appear resistant to immediate change are ultimately caused by the affected individuals themselves; above all, the myth that human beings make their own identities as individuals independent of historical, economic, and social frames of meaning.

Humanists today are faced with similar challenges. Like feminist scholarship, the humanities also produce truth claims and arguments that unsettle and dispute prevailing contemporary social myths and values. Further, the humanities preserve, transmit, and produce knowledge of a kind that seems incompatible with the goals of many American universities today. At some premier institutions the chief goals at times seem to be raising money, strengthening those academic units that bring large amounts of grant and donor monies into the institution, and marketing to undergraduates degree programs that promise financial prowess, political influence, or a lucrative occupation.² How to describe the relationship of the humanities to the rest of the university in this emerging academic world? I suggest that the humanities are perceived through a set of binary oppositions involving, on the one hand, the exact sciences and the social sciences, and on the other, the humanities. The exact sciences and the social sciences are perceived as objective, the humanities as subjective. (Those of you who grade essay exams may recall how often this opposition is brought into play when you discuss grading standards with colleagues and administrators who rely on multiple choice exams.) The exact sciences and the social sciences are perceived as real, the humanities as intangible. The exact sciences and the social sciences are perceived as being practical; the humanities are ornamental, decorative.

This model, reductive though it surely is, nevertheless suggests that within the modern university, conventional, conformist gender stereotyping and the hierarchical power relations it reproduces are not confined to the hallways and party rooms of our undergraduate dorms, but flourish unexamined at many levels of university culture. The knowledge preserved, transmitted, and produced in the humanities is being “feminized”, and I deliberately use the term here in its pejorative meaning of diminished prestige and decline into subordinate status. The social and exact sciences maintain and expand a dominant position in the new academy by consolidating their “robust”, “masculine” status and, as the many studies of our medieval feminist colleagues have taught us, by subordinating and casting out those modes of knowledge that challenge the status quo. “The success of such powerful interrelationships rests

on the expulsion or redefinition of elements perceived as threatening to the hegemony [of patriarchy, my note]."³

Medievalists often feel themselves, and with good reason, caught in a particularly perilous position. If the humanities are perceived as being increasingly irrelevant, how much more irrelevant is the study of the distant past? One notes the use of certain strategies in modernist and premodernist fields in the humanities for fleeing this emerging feminized status. These include, first, jumping on the IT bandwagon, which holds out the promise of money and high status and which has the interesting and unexpected side effect of making philology, bibliography, and codicology relevant and useful again; second, the emergence of a prestige-based culture of theory (what I now call theory as "grand narrative"), particularly in literary studies, which tend to write the troublesome and resistant materialities of humanist fields out of existence altogether, as though to relegate once and for all to the realm of the social and exact sciences all of materiality and its effects; third, the increasing focus of humanities departments on twentieth-century and contemporary studies (often proceeding from pragmatic arguments for meeting student interests) that proclaim the relevance of humanist studies because they, like the social sciences, allow us to study ourselves at the present moment.

For medievalists, the IT strategy of survival can and does work (medievalists and classicists have been at the vanguard of scholars inventing IT applications for literary study), but it must live with the contradiction that in its focus on the materiality of texts it runs afoul precisely of strategy number two, participation in the prestigious theory culture, and so lives in constant (and for the time being unresolvable) intellectual tension with large groups of literary scholars who, alas, function not as its allies but as, at best, uninterested onlookers. Strategies two and three have no pressing need for historical thinking and historicity, and have not found a way to intellectually and ethically anchor historical thinking in their paradigms. At their worst these strategies conform nicely to what medievalists like to call the "presentism" of the modern university and modern society, that is to say, its loss of historical knowledge and its erasure of historical understanding as a mode of knowing in what has been called the growing "culture of amnesia" in modern America. Medievalists whose scholarship employs sophisticated theoretical and critical thinking at times find their work discounted, or even ignored, by the mainstream of theory prestige culture. The response "I really can't ask a question because I'm not a medievalist", for example, subtly harms intellectual dialogue across the boundaries of disciplines and fields because it confers upon the medievalist scholar the (high) status of specialist, yet does so in order to foreclose further intellectual conversation. The reply could be construed to suggest that Medieval Studies belongs on the

margins of academia, a specialized field with little to contribute to general academic trends and to the pressing issues confronting society today. The price of such "gifts of status" is high. Regardless of their theoretical knowledge and sophistication, medievalists (and, I would argue, all humanists) are in danger of being regarded simply as traditional and "old-fashioned", which in today's academic world is another way of saying irrelevant.⁴

Similar ruptures, tensions, and contradictions can also be found within the feminist community and Women's Studies programs, operating as they must within the same institutional and academic constraints. There are, of course, differences. I see few signs that Women's Studies and gender studies are in danger of being perceived as traditional, old-fashioned, and irrelevant, though the basic paradigm of thought that lies behind such terms (innovation is relevant and good, old is irrelevant and bad) certainly surfaces in debates within the interdisciplinary feminist community. In this arena, too, the erasure of history and the loss of historical thinking as a category of analysis haunts feminist medievalists who strive to speak to larger philosophical and historical issues and to reach beyond the confines of their specific disciplines. Women's Studies and gender studies do seem particularly at risk of "presentism". The reasons for the lure of presentism to Women's Studies programs are complex, but one reason might be that speaking to present about the present promises many immediate rewards for such newly formed disciplines and academic units (prestige, funding, faculty lines). Yet the loss of memory, of history, is in fact a pressing issue for all feminists, not just feminist medievalists, for it is precisely the lack and loss of institutional memory that has prevented women from having their own history for so long. Do feminists really wish to endorse and perpetuate the "tradition of discontinuous tradition" that has traditionally characterized women's place in society and the study of women and women's history in patriarchal institutions? I think not.

What is to be done? If the situation I have sketched out seems bleak, it may be because one grows so used to the "compulsory optimism" of American culture that any step away from it is disturbing. Yet as president of the Society for Medieval Feminist Scholarship and as a long-standing member of the organization, I am in a position to note the outstanding achievements and accomplishments of the feminist medievalist community. This scholarly community is extraordinarily vital and productive. Medievalists and medieval feminists in all fields of humanistic study continue to produce scholarship of astonishing breadth, scope, and excellence, scholarship recognized yearly by their peers, modernist and medievalist alike, with numerous awards, fellowships, and prizes. Feminist medievalists chair departments and Women's Studies programs, hold high administrative positions, teach an extraordinary

range of classes, adapt their syllabi to the changing needs of their students, are active in faculty governance and in professional organizations, train future scholars, establish and manage web-based knowledge resources, and so on. We do more than hold on; we hold our own. We must be doing something right.

I suggest that the tools, skills, and knowledge that are the bedrock of our training as medievalists and as feminists represent a set of extraordinary intellectual strengths. What have we learned as medievalists? We have learned how to gather evidence, that is to say, how to do research, how to observe and describe. We have learned to scrutinize evidence, analyze it, and make arguments using it well. Above all, we are practiced in the arts of rhetorical analysis and rhetorical crafting. Few are better equipped to use rhetoric to craft their own arguments. We have become adept “translators” of culture, skilled at using modern analogies to help our students and colleagues grasp the alterity of the past. We know that a shift in perspective can create a shift in outcomes. We know that every model, no matter how powerful, is also limited. We know that form and content, process and substance, are inseparable modes of representation, and that form and process themselves produce meaning. Further, we know how to recognize rhetoric at work, and we know how to analyze and articulate the cultural, social, economic, historical, or political work it is doing. Few are better equipped to scrutinize the claims being made and the political work being done by, for example, the recent widespread appearance of a word such as “interdisciplinarity” in administrative discourse (from my own experience I would add the terms “internationalization” and “globalization”) and the coincidence of its appearance with the corporatization of the American university.

As feminists, we have learned practices for taking meaningful, ethical, action. We know that contexts are created; over the past thirty years, the hard work of feminist scholars and scholars of Women’s Studies and gender studies and the excellence of their scholarship has created a vast and complex set of intellectual and academic contexts in which feminist studies and Medieval Studies matter, and this work continues. We have learned that many battles are won ahead of time, by carefully defining the terms, the questions, and the issues at stake. We have learned to make the invisible visible, to speak forthrightly and persuasively, for example, about the fissures and contradictions that gender norms mask. We have learned that one of the most powerful ways to advance a cause is to vouch for one another. Socialized into gender roles as women, we tend to be very good at communication and at building bridges. We can and do excel at cultivating allies who share, if not all, then some of our goals. We have learned the power of collaboration, both in scholarship and as a form of political action. We have learned that when one is excluded by powerful, informal networks, one must join with others to make one’s own networks, and that we can attain power and use it wisely.

I have tried to describe the multiple intellectual situations in which I and many of my colleagues work so that they illuminate one another. The crisis of the humanities is not so much a problem (defined as an issue to which there is a solution), as a predicament, a set of dilemmas and contradictions to which there are no answers, only ongoing negotiations. This means that the struggle to preserve and advance the humanities, feminist studies, and Women's Studies will not be over anytime soon; we are in this for the long haul. We should neither despair at our defeats, comforting ourselves with the belief that the struggle is hopeless, nor feel euphoric at our triumphs, indulging ourselves in the illusion that the struggle is over. Our passion for justice and for reason, our knowledge of the past and the present, and our multiple intellectual strengths make our voices powerful. Perhaps the task at hand for feminist medievalists is not just to continue the many vigorous and productive intellectual and academic conversations we have with one another, important though that surely is. Perhaps the task at hand is to expand these conversations to include humanists and feminists from other fields and disciplines through informal and formal means alike: conferences, reading groups, team-taught courses, and so on. These suggestions represent tried and true academic structures. I have no doubt that the readers of *MFF* know how and where this intellectual work is already being done, and that they know, as well, about different kinds of scholarly ventures that are reaching many different audiences. I hope that the readers of *MFF* will weigh in on this theme through letters, announcements, essays, and articles, sharing their insights, strategies, and knowledge and speaking up with authority about the value of feminism, historical thinking, and the humanities for the academy and the world.

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¹ The extraordinary self-study done by faculty at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology documenting gender bias against women in the School of Science suggests that similar studies at other institutions might produce similar results. It should be noted that MIT's administration responded quickly with positive remedies. See Robin Wilson, "An MIT Professor's Suspicion of Bias Leads to a New Movement for Academic Women," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (3 December 1999): p. A16. The full text of the report, "A Study of the Status of Women Faculty in Science at MIT," is available electronically to subscribers at the *Chronicle's* web site (www.chronicle.com).

² For a cogent defense of the value of the humanities and analysis of their endangerment in the modern university see James Engell and Anthony Dangerfield, "Humanities in the Age of Money," *Harvard Magazine* (May-June 1998): 48-55; 111. On the endangerment of notions of disinterested inquiry in the sciences see Eyal Press and Jennifer Washburn, "The Kept University," *The Atlantic Monthly* (March 2000): 39-54. Thanks to Bob Clark and Bryan Gilliam for bringing these articles to my attention. On the crisis in the humanities see in particular Bill Readings, *The University in Ruins* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1996).

3 Quoted from Clare A. Lees, "Introduction," *Medieval Masculinities: Regarding Men in the Middle Ages*, Medieval Cultures, vol. 7 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), xxii.

4 As a slur, "old-fashioned" says little about medieval scholarship, but it does reveal the quest for trendiness to be a fundamental imperative of some forms of theory prestige culture. One can only note that scholarship equating fashion and marketability with intellectual innovation has the best chance of success if its claims of newness cannot be evaluated in historical contexts. Attempts by scholars of the distant past (which in my field begins in the 18th century) also can (and do) fall prey to some of the pitfalls of grand narrative thinking, in which the chief usefulness of a literary text lies at times in demonstrating the truth of the grand narrative's logic.

